

Chapter 4

Mini-Lessons That Build Independence

My final student-teaching practicum was in a third-grade classroom. For an entire semester I observed and taught eight-year-olds. I became increasingly familiar with their development and needs, and with the third-grade curriculum. I was thrilled then when I was offered a position teaching third grade in a nearby town. When the joy of being hired calmed down, I called my supervising teacher. In addition to offering her congratulations, she assured me I that I couldn't be more suited for the job.

"But, but . . ." I stammered.

"But, what?" she asked.

"But what do I do on the first day?"

You may feel a bit like I did jumping into writer's workshop. You now know the tone of the workshop and what it looks like when it's up and running—when it's well established—but how do you start?

Initially, many of your mini-lessons will focus on creating a community of writers and the management of your writer's workshop. You might consider brief lessons, for example, on the use of the writing center and folders and on the conferencing procedure. In addition, you will want to do a good deal of modeling of drawing as prewriting, topic

selection, the use of phonemic spelling, labeling pictures (especially in kindergarten and first grade), and what to do if you've completed a piece.

The following is a sample of the mini-lessons I might do during the first month of school. You may pick and choose and you need not adhere to this order. Also, it's important to say that your student's writing development—their needs—should drive your planning, not this book or any other. Your students will show you what they're on the verge of learning, and when you follow their lead, your mini-lessons can't fail.

Week 1

- Model drawing a picture story; label one item by stretching out a word and recording the letters that represent sounds heard.
- Introduce folders and the date stamp.
- Take a tour of the writing center.
- Read an everyday experience story. Invite students to share connections. Record them in a list.
- Choose a short writing sample to project for the whole class to see. Ask, "What did we learn about this writer?" Point out that we learn about the lives and ideas of others through their writing. (Samples should not be from your class. For a list of places to find writing samples, see the sidebar on page 68).

Week 2

- Read *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox (1985). Share a basket of objects. Tell your stories. (See mini-lesson "Writing from Memories" on page 58.)
- Model writing a sentence (or sentences, depending on your class) beneath a picture.
- Remind students that they are experts on many things. Perhaps they have a collection of some sort (second graders are natural collectors), have spent lots of time participating in a favorite activity, or have learned a good deal about something—say, dinosaurs, recycling, or saving pennies. Begin a list titled "Things We Know About" and post it in the classroom. You might begin with your own (highly relatable) areas of expertise: family chores, getting kids to eat their vegetables, riding the subway, things that worry you.

- Model writing a note (to be used when you're in a conference) (see sidebar on page 43).
- Create a list titled "What to Do If You Finish a Piece" and post it on the wall.

Week 3

- Read *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle (1991). Students add details to an outline of a house (see mini-lesson "Adding Details" on page 63).
- Interactive writing: retell a class activity. Add specific, quality details. Model revision techniques such as the caret, arrows, and crossing off as you go.
- Share a piece of your writing that is unclear. Encourage students to ask questions. Later, rewrite the piece with questions answered.
- Share your revised piece, modeling the importance of thinking about audience.
- Modeled writing: demonstrate moving from list to focused topic (see mini-lesson "Using 'Binoculars' to Focus a Topic" on page 61).

Week 4

- Read *No, David!* by David Shannon (1998) and ask the students, "What did this author choose to focus on?" (*David's misbehavior, following rules.*) Eventually you will be able to ask students, "What did you choose to focus on in your writing?"
- Project a writing sample on the board. Ask, "Did this author focus on one topic? If so, what topic did the author focus on?"
- Model the use of a web graphic organizer for focus (see mini-lesson "Focus Web" on page 66).
- Introduce the concept of using "binoculars" for quality details (see "Extension" on page 62).
- Provide students with a topic grid. Basically, it's a box-grid with six to nine suggested topic areas. For example, your grid could include family, friends, school, animals, worst mistake, biggest success, ouch! and so on. Students check or color a box when they've written a piece that fits that category. (Model the use of your own grid. After writing a piece about your father, for example, put a check in the "family" box. Remind students to focus on a small idea within the large topic.)

Using an Organizing Structure for Your Mini-Lessons

Notice that during week 3, I begin to teach students about *ideas* (the first trait, according to six traits writing), which can be subdivided into three important concepts: (1) writing with clarity, (2) focusing on a manageable topic, and (3) writing with quality details. (Quality details are those that go beyond the obvious or general. "We had fun," is a generic detail. "We played Red Rover and I broke through my friends' arms," is a quality detail.) I recommend choosing an organizing principle for your lessons—be it six traits, genre (personal narrative, how-to, poetry), or units of study.

When I first began teaching, my organizing principle was thematic units. Oh, those were the days! We would move from a study of bears to outer space to dinosaurs, integrating literacy, math, and science. It was fun, it was imaginative, and it provided students lots of hooks for learning. However, I was still using what I call the buffet method of teaching writing: details on Monday, great leads on Tuesday, lively verbs on Wednesday, proper nouns on Thursday, focus on Friday. In other words, writing skills were presented in a willy-nilly fashion (all skills demonstrated in my bear books, but willy-nilly just the same). When using the buffet method, students do not have enough time to practice skills—to build upon the knowledge and make it theirs—and teachers tend to both teach and assess those skills that they, as teachers, understand best.

Of course, writing traits are interconnected. It's hard to focus on voice without talking about quality details, word choice, and fluency. However, by clustering lessons, we ensure that our students (and we) develop all of our writing muscles evenly. Right now, you may be the King or Queen of Organization. Your students leave your classroom knowing how to write with a solid beginning, middle, and end. However, they may not be able to identify fluency. An organizing structure helps provide you and students with a road map that takes in *all* the sights in depth, not just breadth.

Teaching Conventions

You may wonder why I'm not focusing more on conventions in the first few weeks. Where are the lessons on writing from left to right,

spaces between words, and capital letters? As you'll recall, I do focus on conventions at the start of each morning meeting when examining the message. Also, I conduct more convention mini-lessons as the year gets going, always reminding students that we write for an audience and therefore want to make our communications understood. However, too much emphasis on conventions will prevent your students from becoming fully engaged, independent writers.

Think of your finest hour in writing, that one moment perhaps when a teacher read your work to the class, your mother called your aunt to read your piece aloud, the local newspaper ran your letter, or you won your high school essay contest. Were you most proud of your comma placement? Your ability to use the semicolon successfully? Of course not. You were pleased that others felt you had something important, interesting, or funny to say. Your students will become engaged in their work when they are taken seriously as writers, when they feel as if what they recorded on paper made someone else smile from ear to ear.

And since we're on the subject of too great a focus on conventions, let me share another view. Learning to write conventionally, like learning to speak properly, has a developmental sequence. We know that primary students, that is, those who have moved beyond scribbles to writing letters and words, *usually* begin by using all capital letters, which are easier for children whose fine motor skills are just developing. They often write strings of letters with mostly consonants because it's the consonant sounds they hear. As they become aware of spacing, they may put dots or lines between their words. When students begin to use more lowercase letters, there will be reversals, especially of the letters *b* and *d*. All of this is expected—and temporary. You could provide mini-lessons that show students how to use two fingers to space their words or teach them the trick of imagining a bed to recall which way the first and last letters face, but why use your valuable teaching time on something that will (unless there is a learning disability) correct itself? I've actually seen kindergarten students write in columns—a result of placing two fingers between each word, before the child was ready for this practice.

Teaching these conventions is akin, I believe, to a mother correcting her child each time he says, "Dada." Imagine a mother saying, "No, sweetie. It's 'Daddy.' Say 'Daddy.'" Mothers don't do this because they honor and delight in all of the stages of speech development. They trust that "Dada" will become "Daddy" all too quickly. I

love seeing those little dots between words in my students' writing and know that those dots, too, will soon disappear.

That's why our mini-lessons must always convey the attitude "We are *all* writers"—not when you master sentence structure or capital letters, but now. Every day. You show your young students what professional writers do because you truly believe they are up to the task of emulating these authors.

Teaching Strategies for Mini-Lessons

Many teachers new to writer's workshop become overwhelmed with the idea of providing writing mini-lessons five days a week. I'm often asked, "Where do I find all those lessons on voice?" No matter which form of scaffolding you choose, it may help to conducting mini-lessons that incorporate these five teaching strategies:

1. Mentor texts: Examine published writing to learn craft.
2. Modeled writing: Share your writing (often writing in front of the students) and welcome their feedback.
3. Interactive writing: You and students compose together.
4. Graphic organizers: Collect observations, strategies, and thoughts about writing and organize them visually.
5. Examining writing (not your students'): Project writing samples on a screen and discuss the presence or lack of a trait.

Sometimes a mini-lesson incorporates more than one of these strategies, as I demonstrate in using Eric Carle's (1991) *A House for Hermit Crab* to move into an interactive writing lesson (page 63) or *McDuff Moves In* by Rosemary Wells (2005) to complete a graphic organizer (page 59). Further explanation of each strategy follows.

Mentor Texts

Learning writing skills within the context of fabulous (and fabulously written) literature helps build a genuine awe of craft as well as a sense of belonging to a fun, interesting, imaginative community. "Mo Willems is an author," thinks the admiring second grader, "and so am I."

Other kids were raising their hands. Dolores Starbuckle jumped up and down on her knees and waved her arms like a willow tree in a windstorm. Ms. Janice motioned for Dolores to sit back down.

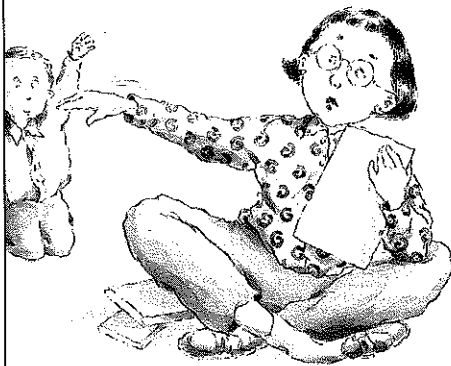


Figure 4.1
*Andy Shane and
the Very Bossy
Dolores Starbuckle*

Many teachers attend conferences and search the Internet for lists of mentor texts and ways to use them to model fine writing. I have nothing against these lists (in fact I've written many), but they can cause frustration. Often a teacher discovers that her school library carries only one or two of the titles on the list, or a librarian painstakingly categorizes literature in her collection according to six traits only to discover that the teachers have difficulty knowing *how* the person who initially tagged the book as a good model for word choice would use the book with primary students. So study the lists if it helps, but in addition, learn how to examine the literature in your classroom and in the books you love to identify author's craft. It's not as hard as you might think.

Figure 4.1 is an interior page from one of my books, *Andy Shane and the Very Bossy Dolores Starbuckle* (2005). Look at the text on this page and imagine (beyond

conventions) what you might focus on in a mini-lesson.

Using the page shown in Figure 4.1, you might focus on the following:

- Word choice and how vivid verbs bring energy to writing: *raising, jumped, waved, motioned*.
- How quality details ("Dolores jumped up and down on her knees and waved her arms like a willow tree in a windstorm") help the reader picture the story. (I always tell young students that it's the job of the writer to create a movie in the mind of a reader.)
- The way in which authors *show* what a character is feeling rather than *telling* us. We know that Dolores is excited and that Ms. Janice wishes she would be a little less so, simply by their actions.



Once you've chosen your writing organizational structure (whether it be genre, six traits, or some other structure), prepare file folders. For example, I use six traits, so I have one folder marked "Ideas," another "Organization," and so on. As you read books to your students, you will no doubt think, "Oh, this is a great example of . . ." Write the down the title and toss the slip of paper into the corresponding folder. The following year, you will have lots of familiar mentor texts at your fingertips as you plan your mini-lessons.

Three lessons from a single paragraph! Give it a try and you'll see that you'll be able to do this with any book in your classroom. You'll want to preview books ahead of time. My passage would be a fine selection for verb choice, but not for adjectives. Make sure the book you select is a good model of the skill you'll be teaching that day. The better you become at identifying author's craft in the stories and nonfiction you love, the more confident you will be during your mini-lessons. The students

will pick up on your love and admiration for a book and will share their appreciation as well.

In fact, you might want to end your mini-lesson with an invitation to students: "As you're reading today, see if you can't find examples of vivid verbs, quality details, or show, don't tell." The students will come running with text that can be used in subsequent mini-lessons. And how proud the student will be when you use the book that *he or she* found!

When choosing literary mentors, don't forget to include nonfiction. Many young students gravitate toward factual reading and writing and will incorporate both the tone and elements of nonfiction into their writing. When teaching expository writing—how-to's, reports, persuasive letters, and essays—it's essential that students have had lots of exposure to these genres.

Sample Mentor Text Lessons

Writing from Memories

On Hand: The book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox (1985) and a basket of objects that not only spark my childhood stories, but hopefully my students' memories as well. At one time or another I have had in my basket: a scrap of silk, a flashlight, a worn teddy bear, a child's ring, and a cat's collar.

Mini-Lesson: I read *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, a story about a little boy who brings a basket of objects to Miss Nancy, an old woman who has

lost her memory. Miss Nancy takes the objects out of the basket one by one and consequently remembers stories from her childhood.

Then I bring *my* basket out. I, too, lift objects into the air and tell my own stories. For example, I show the scrap of silk and tell students how my parents had a silky blanket on their bed that my brothers and I fought over. One day when we were tussling—each pulling in a different direction, the coveted blanket tore.

Or I tell them about the time when my then husband and I took our kids on a camping trip. My two-year-old son woke in his portable crib at five a.m. Desperate to get more sleep, I passed him our heavy camping flashlight to play with. He lifted that flashlight, leaned over the railing of his crib, and dropped it on my husband's head!

You probably know what my primary students are doing while I'm telling my stories: They're waving their hands in the air, desperate to share the memory that my story helped them to recall. Instead of encouraging them to tell their stories (though you could invite a couple if you wish), I have them identify the topic of their story and send them off to write. They practically run to the writing center for their folders.

I have never found that the students don't relate to my objects or stories. The slip of silk solicits wonderfully detailed narratives about beloved "blankies" and often the heart-pulling story of having to part with that security object. One student will say, "I'm going to write about the blanket I had as a baby," and suddenly four more hands shoot up. Those kids are going to write about their "binkies," their "nappies," and their "night-nights.") The flashlight story reminds students of all the "funny things I did as a baby" stories that their parents and relatives have told them over and over again.

Extension: Many teachers extend this lesson by inviting students to bring in an object that prompts a story they can tell and later write about.

Sensory Words

On Hand: The book *McDuff Moves In* by Rosemary Wells (2005) and a whiteboard.

Mini-Lesson: Remind students that when we write with quality details, the reader feels as if he or she is right there, experiencing the story firsthand. One way that authors make the story come alive for us is through the use of sensory details. Draw a four-column chart on the board. At the top

of the columns write: *hear, feel, smell, and taste*. (Notice that I did not include the sense of sight. Most writing is so visual that you would be stopping to record every other word of a story.)

Tell students that you are going to reread *McDuff Moves In* and on this reading, you would like the students to stop you every time they hear a word that allows them to use one of the senses listed on the chart. Record the words in the proper column. Some words, such as *sausages*, will appear in more than one column (smell, taste). Point out that although most objects can be touched, the feelings words tell how something feels: *soft, fuzzy, scratchy, warm, wet*.

Invite students to include sensory words in their writing that day.

Extension: The next day, provide students with a blank organizer like the one you drew on the board. Ask them to look back on the writing they did the day before and record any sensory words they used in their writing. Those that have few (or no sensory words) will be inclined to revise their writing to include more.

Modeled Writing

It's Monday morning and I'm madly scrambling through my professional books for an introductory lesson on quality details. Certainly someone has the quintessential lesson for introducing the concept. It seems I have to cast a wide net to find the "just-right" lesson. However, I remember that modeling a trait (and our thinking around that trait) is truly one of the most effective ways of teaching writing skills, so I give up trying to find a lesson someone else has written and sit myself in front my students to show them how I write with details instead.

I need to show students that the right details can transform a piece. In front of them, I write something banal:

It's peaceful on my back porch. I love to sit there.

I then say, "Oh, I can see that I haven't created a picture in the reader's mind at all. I want to write a piece that makes the reader feel as if he or she is sitting on the porch with me." I flip the chart paper and write the following, explaining my thinking as I write:

There are three chairs on my back porch. One of them, a little white rocker, is my favorite. I pitch back and forth listening to the sound of the . . . ["What is the curved part of a rocking chair leg called? Runners, I think."] . . . runners on the wooden floor. Above me, a maple tree spreads its leafy arms, creating a canopy. A chickadee flits from limb to limb.

"Is this better?" I ask the students.

"Yes," they say. "We can see your back porch now."

Don't hesitate to use your own writing to teach craft.

Sample Modeled Writing Lesson

Using "Binoculars" to Focus a Topic

On Hand: A pair of binoculars and an easel pad.

Mini-Lesson: "Put on your binoculars" becomes a metaphor for both focus and the inclusion of quality details in my classes, but I don't want to assume that my primary students have had experience with binoculars and that they truly know what binoculars can do. So I bring a pair in and give each student a turn looking through them before beginning my morning meeting.

During morning meeting, I tell students that I'm going to begin by writing a list. Many primary students, through training or by nature, make lists. I want to help them to differentiate between a list and a focused topic. So I write my "I like" list:

I like my family.
I like my friends.
I like my house.
I like my dogs.
I like to write.

However, I say, during writing time I don't want to write a list. I want to write with focus. So, I'm going to take out my handy binoculars (here I don't bring out the real binoculars, but use my hands to

create pretend ones, causing all of the students to create their own pretend binoculars—perfect!) and tell them that I'm going to choose one of the items on my list to focus on. I circle one of the items, such as "I like my dogs," turn the page on the easel pad, and write several focused sentences about my dogs, complete with quality details. "There," I say. "Now I've written a focused piece."

Ask students to use their binoculars again to tell you what they will focus on during writing time today.

Extension: Use the pretend binoculars to focus on quality details as well. (This concept is inspired by lessons in the highly recommended *Reviser's Toolbox* by Barry Lane [1999].) Put on your pretend binoculars and say to students: "I see a field." Then "focus" your binoculars and look again. "There is a cow in the field." Focus again: "The cow is black and white and chewing her cud." Focus: "There is a fly on the cow's nose and it's washing its feet." Help students to understand that zooming in leads to quality details.

Choose a different setting—a road, a room, the beach—and invite students to take turns using their binoculars to report on details.

You'll find that students, when examining writing that lacks details, will often say, "The writer needs to put on her binoculars."

Interactive Writing

Do you remember playing the game in which each person begins a story and then passes the paper on until everyone else has had the opportunity to add a sentence? Kids love this game because of the funny twists and turns each story takes; they also love collaborating. And why not? Collaborating brings fresh ideas and the joy of creating something together.

This is true of interactive writing as well. With this strategy, students compose together. As the teacher you inquire, guide, and shape. Purists of this technique would say that the students are the scribes—the marker is in their hands. However, there are times when I know the lesson will move at the right pace if I'm the one doing the recording. (In the primary grades, I will often have students record a word or two, but seldom an entire sentence, as others will lose interest.)

The beauty of the interactive writing is that not only do your students teach one another (why is it that lessons are learned more quickly when modeled by classmates?), but all students experience a sense of pride in the resulting product. This is essential for those students who, for whatever reason, have to work harder at writing.

Sample Interactive Writing Lesson

Adding Details

On Hand: *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle (1991), a whiteboard, and an easel pad.

Mini-Lesson: Read the book (preferably the day before, which will allow more time for writing during this lesson). Remind students that Hermit Crab thought his house looked plain, so he added lots of sea creatures to give it color and interest. When we write, we add lots of details to give our work interest.

Next, draw a large square on the whiteboard to represent a house. Point out that presently, this is a very plain house. Invite students to come up one by one and add a detail. Hand off the marker until each child has had a turn. Initially you'll get predictable details: roof, windows, door. But after these are done students will begin to add more imaginative details.

When every child has had a turn, go to your easel pad and, together, write a paragraph about the newly decorated house that includes every single detail.

Extension: In winter, draw three circles to represent a snowperson. Repeat the lesson, allowing students to add details.

Graphic Organizers

If you are like me, you never stop admiring the amazing details included in Nicola Davies's nonfiction or the voice in Kate McMullen's picture books, and you share these observations with your students often. Nevertheless, I fear there are times when, especially for our

strong visual learners, we sound a little like the adults in a Charlie Brown TV special: WAWAWA stunning WAWAWA listen to this WAWAWA . . .

And that's why I love graphic organizers: less talk and more visual representation. They allow students to make their own connections as we pull together data, data that guides them to new understandings. Graphic organizers provide schemata: a way of structuring information or arranging key concepts into a pattern, enhancing understanding and application.

Students who might not otherwise participate in a discussion will offer information for a graphic organizer. Unlike worksheets, graphic organizers are open-ended and therefore, I validate all responses. If a student gives me a response for which there is no box (or column, circle, path, etc.), I create one. If I were collecting lively verbs, for example, and a child provided a word that was not an action word, I might create a new space titled "Words that remind us of verbs."

Why not just reject the sometimes seemingly incorrect response? Because in writing, participation and risk taking are more important than being right. And often, if I take the time to question the student's response, he or she shares a legitimate line of thinking that was not immediately apparent. If young students are hesitant to participate (usually the first time they've done a graphic organizer with me), I put students' initials next to their responses. Now all hands go up!

As mentioned in Chapter 2, I always model the use of a graphic organizer with the whole group before handing it to individuals or placing them in the writing center. For this initial presentation, they can be duplicated on overhead transparencies or quickly sketched on your easel pad or whiteboard. What's amazing is that if you use organizers on a regular basis, students—even primary students—will begin to invent their own.

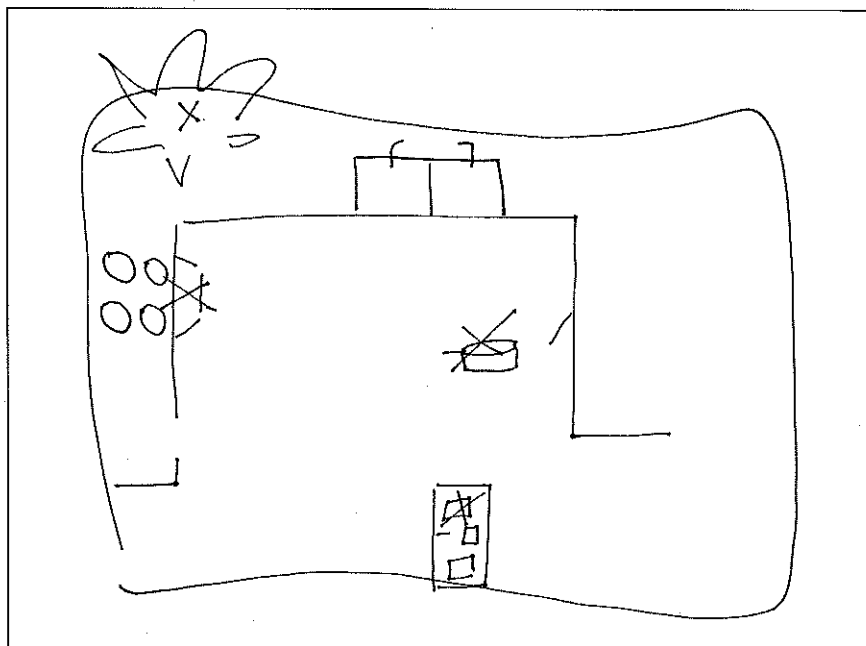
Sample Lessons Using Graphic Organizers

Idea Map

On Hand: Whiteboard.

Mini-Lesson: At times your class will be buzzing with the energy of winning topics, and then there will be lulls when it seems as if all the familiar subjects

Figure 4.2
An Idea Map



have been beaten to death. In these instances (or when you're getting your writer's workshop up and running) modeling an idea map always reignites students, prompting fresh and lively narratives.

Tell students that you came to school not knowing what you were going to write today. So, you've decided to create an idea map. Draw the outline of a map on the whiteboard (Figure 4.2).

Now tell them that in order to create an idea map, you need to select a place you know well: your kitchen, the playground, your backyard, your daycare, or your grandmother's home—any of these will

work as long as it's a place where you've spent lots of time.



I've written the following books that provide graphic organizers for writing mini-lessons:

Trait-Based Writing Graphic Organizers and Mini-Lessons: 20 Graphic Organizers with Mini-Lessons to Help Students Brainstorm, Organize Ideas, Draft, Revise, and Edit (2008).

Graphic Organizers for the Overhead: Reading and Writing (2007).

The Big Book of Reproducible Graphic Organizers, with Dottie Raymer (1999).

Choose a setting and begin to sketch the physical landmarks on the map. Place an *X* each and every time your drawing prompts the recollection of a story. For example, if I were drawing a map of my kitchen, I would say: "The cupboards go here. Oh! When my children were small, and I needed to accomplish something, I would open the cupboard doors and let them pull out all the pots and pans—*X* marks the spot. I have a story

here." I keep filling in the map this way, recalling the day I was pureeing soup for guests and the cover came off the food processor, covering the walls with soup, or the time the taco shells caught fire in the oven and we had to call the fire department. Even my daughter's drawing on the front of the refrigerator suggests a story.

When you have marked your map with four or five Xs, invite students to draw an idea map of their own.

Extension: Provide students with an outline of a child's body. (I search for a gingerbread person outline on the Web and download the image.) Encourage students to draw a Band-Aid everywhere on the body where they've experienced a boo-boo. You will get many great "owie" stories with lots of interesting details.

Focus Web

On Hand: Whiteboard and marker.

Mini-Lesson: Draw a circle in the center of the board. Choose a topic that is too unwieldy, for example: "weather." Next, ask students to brainstorm everything they could tell a reader about weather. Students might begin recalling types of weather (*rain, snow, sleet, hail, hurricanes, tornadoes*), move on to clothing (*raincoat, umbrella, boots, mittens*), and then think of the less obvious (*weather forecasts, radar, tornado sirens*, etc.). Keep adding content until the students seem to truly exhaust all ideas.

Then say, "Wow, weather is too big a topic. If we were to write about this topic, I fear we wouldn't have any quality details at all." (Anything less than a book would be one long list). Model choosing one of the subtopics in your web, perhaps *rain*. In my class we talk about choosing the Goldilocks idea: one that's not too big, nor too small, but just right. With students, write an interactive paragraph on this topic that includes specific, sensory details.

Extension: Suggest students make a web for one of the following "too-large" topics and then choose a smaller idea to develop in their writing:

- My family
 - My vacation
 - Things I can do
-
-

Examining Writing

One of the most effective ways to teach writing (and one that is seldom used) is projecting sample writing on a screen and encouraging students to discuss one specific aspect of craft. Before I go any further, let me stress that you don't want to use your own students' writing. You don't want your students' anxiety raised each and every time you mention their names for fear that it's going to be a moment of shame instead of fame. (Do feel free, however, to show your students writing as a positive model on a consistent basis—just don't offer it up for discussion.)

Project the writing and tell students which written quality you want them to examine. You do not want to begin by saying, "So. What do you think of this writing?" If you do, students will offer up many responses on disparate areas—often focusing on the conventions, length, or penmanship. This might feel gratifying until you realize that all of these different comments dilute the mini-lesson and have very little effect on the application of skills. Instead, ask one question, such as:

- Is this writing clear?
- Did the author include quality details?
- Did the author of this piece focus on one topic?
- Does the lead hook you?
- Is the piece well organized?
- Does the ending work?
- Does this piece have voice?
- Does the writing flow?

I often have primary students answer my question first with a thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or the ever popular waving thumbs for sort of. Then we discuss the trait, or lack thereof, beginning with those students who have their thumbs up. (If you begin with students who feel the trait is lacking, those with their thumbs up will no longer want to respond.) The discussion proceeds in this way:

Me: Did the author focus on one topic? (*Wait for thumbs.*) Sujata, you say yes. Tell us more.

Sujata: Well, it's sort of like an all-about-me book.

Me: So you feel the author is writing about himself—that he has chosen *himself* as the topic.

Sujata: (*Nods.*)

Me: Who else had his or her thumb up?

Jason: He's sort of writing about things he likes, except when he tells us about the movie that was boring.

Me: So you feel, Jason, his topic is *things he likes*.

(*This response prompts all the kids who had thumbs down and are dying to have their say to wave their arms in the air. I call on Mandy.*)

Mandy: I don't think he focuses at all. First he's talking about school, then foods he likes, and then he starts talking about that boring movie.

Me: So, you don't think his piece is focused. What do you think the author could do to improve this piece?

Mandy: He could pick one of those things and write about it with details.

Marcus: He needs to use the binoculars.

Me: That's a good thing for us to keep in mind as we write today . . .

Notice that I never say which group of students is "right." As with graphic organizers, you want to validate every response, allowing them to grow into a genuine discussion. The more you listen (and refrain from instructing), the more participation you'll get. And the more students participate, the more they will understand the trait and apply it to their own writing. Remember, students learn more when they become accustomed to listening to each other.

When choosing samples, exhibit a range of writing ability. Those that would receive a low rubric score allow your students to feel smug as they offer up good writing advice. Those that would receive a high rubric score become a road map—a vision of how to accomplish fine writing.

I have only a few memories of learning to write in elementary school, but I do remember one day in third grade. We were given the prompt "A grandmother is . . ." I can't recall a single word of my own draft, but at the end of our writing time, our teacher read us an article written by a nine-year-old in 1955. The piece had voice, humor, and perfectly selected details.



So where do you find writing samples?

- * Ask your colleagues for writing samples (take the names off). You don't need to use samples from your own grade. I often use pieces written by third or fourth graders in primary classrooms.
- * Search for *anchor papers* for standardized assessments on the Web. You'll find that many school districts are posting writing samples for the use of assessment practice.
- * Save copies of your students' work this year to use next year.
- * Use samples from the book *Writing Lessons for the Overhead: Grades 2-3* by Lola M. Schaefer (2006).

Forty years later, I can still remember one line: "Usually grandmas are fat, but not too fat to tie kids' shoes." (Perhaps because this line described my beloved grandma.) I was in awe of what was possible.

* * *

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, allow your students' written work to guide the planning of your mini-lessons. Also, reinforce positive application of writing skills and revision techniques by asking students to coteach mini-lessons with you. Students are more apt to try new strategies when they have been modeled by classmates. Before long, you'll have more mini-lessons than days in the month, but that's a fine problem to have.

Chapters 4 and 5: Mini-Lessons That Build Independence and A Year of Mini-Lessons for Growing Writers

Discussion Questions

- Jennifer writes: “It’s important to say that your students’ writing development—their needs—should drive your planning.” What does this planning look like? How do you follow a sequence of instruction and at the same time allow your students to influence the direction of the writing curriculum?
- The organizing principle of mini-lessons in this book is the six traits of writing. What guides the sequence of your writing instruction? Do you focus on one or two skills at a time, or do you present the “buffet method” of writing?
- Jennifer writes: “Too much emphasis on conventions will prevent your students from becoming fully engaged, independent writers.” Do you agree? How do we teach conventions, and help our students to apply them, without overemphasizing their importance?
- Five instructional strategies are presented on page 56. Which of these strategies are you currently using? Which one(s) would you like to try or use more?
- One strategy for providing students with a vision of success is projecting and discussing writing samples (not your students’ writing). Where can you find these samples to share? How can you work as a group to pool resources?
- Have you tried any of the mini-lessons in these chapters? What were the results?

Group Activity

Although it’s nice to have lists of suggested mentor texts, often the books on the list are not in the school library, or it’s difficult to guess how the person who chose the book actually used it with students. Instead of relying on lists alone, consider choosing books that you know and love to model fine writing. Examine the picture books you brought to this meeting and identify the ways in which these books could be used as mentor texts. Take turns giving a three-minute presentation of the books and the traits you would highlight.

Before the Next Meeting

- Choose one of the mini-lessons from these chapters (preferably one that uses a technique that’s new to you) and try it with your class. Be prepared to share your results at the next meeting.